Please Write:
Using Critical Friend Letter Writing in Teacher Research

By Anastasia P. Samaras & Corey Sell

Dialogue, collaboration, and critique are important components used in the professional development of teachers and particularly the sharing of writings and ideas among peers (Hord, 2004). Peers can play an essential role in offering supportive feedback and alternative perspectives, and providing peer review—an essential attribute of teacher professional practice (Li, Liu, & Steckelberg, 2009; Wilkins, Shin, & Ainsworth, 2009). Teachers who inquire into their practice with others receive "benefits from the support of colleagues engaged in similar enterprises and the scrutiny of the wider educational community" (Clarke & Erickson, 2003, p. 5). Russell (2002) noted that the act of recognizing and sharing tensions with colleagues allows a teacher to work towards a professional and transformational change in teaching. Bodone, Guðjónsdóttir, and Dalmau (2004) add that "collaborative dialogue contributes to the iterative and ongoing process by which uneasiness, and even dissonance, becomes a catalyst for new perspectives, new findings and teachings, new action, and new questions" (p. 773).

When teachers make their work available to the critique of others and work as critical friends, it improves the quality of their research so that it is not limited to their viewpoint, judgment, or opinion (Loughran &

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Northfield, 1998). Critical friends provide thoughtful and insightful feedback on the actions and engagement of practice (Costa & Kallick, 1993; Schuck & Russell, 2005). Although critical friend work has been studied by teacher educators working with colleagues (Bass, Anderson-Patton, & Allender, 2002; Kosnik, Samaras, & Freese, 2006; Louie, Drevdahl, Purdy, & Stackman, 2003; Schuck & Segal, 2002; Tobery-Nystrom, 2011), there has been less attention to students' experiences. This study examines students' experiences using letter writing designed as a sociocultural-based tool for critical friend work to promote dialogue and critique of their self-study teacher research projects. It seeks to understand their diverse experiences to inform future practice and contribute to the knowledge base of critical friend work in teacher research. Understanding how, and in what ways, critical friends worked together, listened, and voiced their thinking with peers has applicability to other classrooms and for teacher educators interested in tapping into the potential of peer audience to support teachers' professional development.

Conceptual framework

According to Vygotsky (1978, 1986), cognition is always socially mediated, especially through the psychological tool of language. Learning through dialogue is active, social, and affective and shapes individuals' mental processes (Bakthin, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978, 1987; Wertsch, 1991). Actions and thoughts are culturally mediated, "indirectly shaped by forces that originate in the dynamics of communication" (Wertsch, 1985, p. 81). Vygotsky asserted that learning, thinking, and knowing arise through collaboration and reappropriating feedback from others and a willingness to learn with and from each other (Wells, 2000). It is the community that helps extend and transform an individual's understanding and yet it is the individual who makes cognition their own, from intersubjectivity to intrasubjectivity.

Learning occurs within a learner's zone of proximal development (ZPD) on two planes or "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Kozulin (1990) draws a similarity of Vytotsky's notions of these two planes to the work of G. H. Mead (1974) who wrote:

> I know of no way in which intelligence or mind arise or could have arisen, other than through the internalization by the individual of the social processes of experience and behavior…made possible by the individual's taking the attitude of the other individuals toward himself or toward what is being thought about. (p. 192)

Similarly, Gadamer (2004) speaks of "the communion" that occurs through dialogue and states,

> To reach an understanding with one's partner in a dialogue is not merely a matter of total self-expression and the successful assertion of one's point of view, but a transformation into a communion, in which we do not remain what we were. (p. 371)

Learning zones, adapted from the co-directional nature of ZPD, are multiple spheres of collaborative work, which invite participants with various skills to explore and inquire through collective activity (Samaras, Kayler, Rigsby, Weller, & Wilcox, 2006).

Inspired by the Vygotskian (1978, 1981) principles of the interdependence of language and thought and socially shared cognition, the idea of students writing and dialoguing about research situated in their teaching practice was conceived (Samaras, 2011). Situated learning and social cognition generate a participatory consciousness and perspective taking and create a platform for a reciprocal think-and-talk aloud that both supports and critiques student thoughts and ideas. Writing, as a cultural tool, would serve two audiences—self and other—with development occurring on an individual and collective level.

The language and thought connection captured through writing has been studied by Warford (2011) as a way for students "to control and systematize concepts" (p. 255). Reiman (1999) found that "written speech is a self-reviewing structure of thought" so when we write, we speak to ourselves and when we share that writing with others and make it public, it allows us to hear our thoughts again and understand them in a way when others ask us for clarification, elaboration, and conceptualization. Based in the tenets of Vygotsky and Dewey, Smith (2001) transformed lectures into an arena for the social construction of knowledge by asking teachers to write on a topic related to a given lecture and then share their written thoughts with peers. Also situated in Vygotskian theory, Wennergren & Rönnerman (2006), used web-dialogue as a mediating tool in teachers' action research projects.

My thinking was that letter writing would activate students' personal thinking and sanction authentic and honest dialogue with peers. The notion of slowing down the hand and brain through letter writing could also promote students' deliberative reflection (Cirello, Valli, & Taylor, 1992) with mindfulness of the consequences of their actions presented to peers. Sharing their writing with critical friends made their professional activity public and available for critique. Therefore, I designed three letters each entailing a series of prompts to generate individual thinking but also for peers to offer constructive feedback that moved beyond technical advice and pushed one to question how their interpretations might be viewed by others.

Method

Over my years of using letter writing in teaching research, I observed some variability in the quality of the critical friend letters yet anonymous feedback indicated that students thought the letter writing had been quite useful. Nonetheless, during one semester, my attention was quickly drawn to two very different critical friend teams; one seemed to embrace the letter writing and worked extremely well together; the other had with obvious tensions. I noticed the letters of each group were different not only in length but in the substance and quality of their exchanges. After the course ended, I wanted to hear student viewpoints about the

letter writing experience from these extreme groups to better understand its use more generally and to contribute to the knowledge base of critical friend work in teacher research.

Corey, who was working with me as a graduate research assistant at the time, agreed to join me in exploring and critically analyzing the perspectives of the students in the two outlier critical friend teams. The variances of their experiences in letter writing and how they understood its usage could inform not only my practice, but other teacher educators who are interested in using critical friend work. We asked the following research questions:

1. What are students' perspectives of the role of letter writing in shaping their understanding of their teacher research project over time?

2. Did students find the letter writing useful for a particular component of their research project?

3. What did students see as the benefits and challenges in using the letter writing?

4. What suggestions do students offer for using letter writing in teacher research?

Case Study Method

Extreme sampling, or the selection of extreme cases, was employed in this study because they provide rich information and are "unusual or special in some way, such as outstanding successes or notable failures" (Patton, 2002, p. 231). The selection of the instrumental cases was based on classroom observations and students' reflections about their critical friend work documented in the final section of their teacher research projects. Instrumental case studies allow researchers to "get insight into the question by studying a particular case" (Stake, 1995, p. 3) and with a deep exploration. The study entailed a multiple-case embedded design (Yin, 2009) using six instrumental case studies: two extreme groups each composed of three individuals. Aligned with the extreme sampling, a two-tail design (Yin, 2009) was used to explore the experiences of students in the cases.

Context

The study takes place in a graduate level capstone teacher research course at a large public Mid-Atlantic university in the United States. The major course project was for students to enact a self-study teacher research project. Self-study research is a reflective investigative practice that springs from personally situated inquiry and generates new knowledge through critical collaborative inquiry (LaBoskey, 2004; Samaras, 2011). It is paradoxically, individual and collective, personal and interpersonal, and private and public (Samaras & Freese, 2006). Critical collaborative inquiry is a methodological component of self-study research which requires that personal insights be documented, shared, and critiqued with critical friends to validate the researcher's interpretations (Samaras, 2011). The role of a critical friend

is to provoke new ideas and interpretations, question the researcher's assumptions, and participate in open, honest, and constructive feedback (Breslin et al., 2008). They solicit respectful questioning and divergent views to obtain alternative perspectives and work to help validate the quality and legitimacy of each other's claims. With a commitment to inquiry and to each other, critical friends can "nurture a community of intellectual and emotional caring" (Pine, 2009, p. 236). Nonetheless, the structure and pedagogy of critical friend work can be problematic (McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 2003; Russell & Schuck, 2004; Schuck & Segal, 2002).

Central to the course design was students' shared responsibility for improved learning through forums of peer interchange. Accordingly, students were prompted to share their thinking and uncertainties about their research by writing and responding to each other in a series of critical friend letters using Microsoft Word and posting them to each other on *Blackboard* Scholar®, a web-based community site. Class time was also allotted for critical friend teams to talk further about their letters and research projects. As the instructor, I also offered feedback on each student letter and response. The letters were structured to prompt students' articulation of: (1) their personal situated inquiry, (2) data aligned with their inquiry, and (3) data analysis for critical friend validation through check-coding (see Table 1).

Participants

The class was composed of secondary education majors completing their Master of Education degree after achieving certification as teachers. Most were teaching in their own classroom and some were working as teacher substitutes or in after

Table 1
Critical Friend Letters
Suggested prompts for each letter can be found in Samaras, 2011

Letter One Response	A letter about your research focus, rationale, and proposal shared with your critical friend	Rationale and Proposal. Designed to prompt your identification and articulation of your inquiry with peer input
Letter Two and Response	A letter about your data collection shared with your critical friend	Data Collection. An opportunity to gain another perspective about your data collection and alignment with your research question
Letter Three and Response	A letter about your data analysis shared with your critical friend	Data Analysis. Provides reciprocal peer support and validation from another perspective as you work through your data analysis

school programs. There were 15 students; six males and nine females who were certified to teach in the following disciplines: two in science, one in mathematics, six in history and social studies, and six in English. Participants in the case study included two critical friend teams: Critical Friend Team One included three participants who appeared to have positive critical friend experience; two females and one male; all are English teachers. The male was employed as a full-time teacher and the two females were working as teacher substitutes.

Critical Friend Team Two team included three participants who appeared to have a negative critical friend experience; two females and one male; two are science teachers and the other female is a mathematics teacher. Both females were employed as full-time teachers and the male was working as a teacher substitute. Pseudonyms have been used for all participants: Critical Friend Team One included Luro, Susie, and Teo. Critical Friend Team Two included Zariah, Katherine, and Ryan. Participant consent forms were secured after receiving approval by the university institutional human subjects review board.

Data Sources

Multiple data sources were collected that aimed to understand students' perspectives and experiences of letter writing in the critical friend teams: Primary data sources included: (a) three critical friend letters, (b) three critical friend letter responses, (c) individual semi-structured interviews, and (d) reflective summaries of critical friend work documented in students' final papers. Secondary sources included: (a) an instructor's log with research memos generated from classroom observations, students' tracked feedback to each other on research drafts; and email correspondence; (b) anonymous student feedback collected at mid-term and end-of-term; and (c) analytical memoing conducted by the co-researchers.

Data Analysis

The unit of analysis (Yin, 2009) was to understand how students, working in their critical friend team, perceived and experienced the letter writing tool. After student grades were posted and after they graduated from the program, Corey interviewed the six participants and transcribed the interviews. For the interview analysis, the constant comparison method was used to independently identify codes and categories (Creswell, 2007) through open, axial, and selective coding (Patton, 2002). More specifically, we individually read and reread each interview utilizing initial code identification with line-by-line coding, tag codes noted in margins, and with memoing of repeated statements. Corey logged his coding and reflections about the data after conducting and then after transcribing each interview, which he posted on Google docs. I logged my coding and reflections with tracked comments and color coding. We met in person, by phone and in Voice over internet (VoIP) to discuss our insights of the incoming data, which then prompted more reflective thought on the fuller data set as well as our check-coding.

Analysis generated from multiple reads and dialogue resulted in the following themes for our first level of analysis of letter writing: (a) articulating research; (b) cognitive support; (c) affective support; (d) characteristics of critical friend work: dialogue, accountability, vulnerability, honesty, reciprocity of trust and commitment, and continuity in communication; and (e) student concerns and suggestions in using letter writing. As Maxwell and Miller (2008) recommend, instead of segmenting data as categories, which are narrowed more on the structure of the text, data were then analyzed on a second level of analysis with meaning drawn from the text in a holistic fashion. Accordingly, we next examined for the connections and relationships between the categories, which was particularly useful in trying to understand the dynamics and differences within and across the two critical friend teams and to capture a narrative of their experiences in using the tool of critical friend letter writing.

We listened carefully to what each participant said while asking ourselves: "What was their individual behavior, attitudes and perceptions about the letter writing?" "How was each person speaking about themselves and how did they speak about their teammates?" "Was there a plot to their personal and collective story?" "What were the contrasting issues and voices within each team and across the teams?" We used these categories to examine for certain conditions, episodes or correspondence and patterning (Stake, 1995). A concept mapping (Novak, 1995) of the dynamics of each critical friend team was drawn and discussed. Using cross-case synthesis, the data were then used to compose a final narrative of each critical friend team resulting in the following frames: (a) letter writing as audience; (b) letter writing as articulation and perspective taking; (c) letter writing as constructive and non-judgmental feedback; and (d) letter writing as process.

Results

Narrative of Critical Friend Team One

Letter writing as audience. This critical friend team of three teachers met each other during a class break to continue talking about the research they have been talking about for an hour during an in-class critical friend work time. Teo explains:

> In class, in front of each other when I would walk with her at the vending machine, even that type of thing made the bond happen and I think that those (pause) right there is where I got a lot of the meat of the ideas of where to take the project. So the letter writing became formalized in a certain way, like stepping stones along the process.

The team embraced the reciprocity of letter writing. Susie, who had completed extensive journaling in the past, indicated that writing a letter to someone else "is different from journaling where one's thoughts remain with oneself." The letters offered an audience for personal and collective reflection, "to have my thinking being reflective all along as well. I felt like on some level I had new discoveries as

a result of explaining the situation so that they would understand it." Students read each other's letters several times before coming to the group. Luro shares, "We were constantly asking the other one for suggestions and opinions…so it became more of a thing than just the assignment for the class." Teo offers Luro his opinion freely and suggests in letter three:

> At this point, I don't know if it would be a good idea to start researching self-efficacy only because we are so far in. I think you have a good framework for your research and some decent results, but I feel like moving to self-efficacy might put you over the edge.

In an analytical memo Corey wrote: "This team seems to transcend the letter writing to dialogue. Their work took a life of its own; beyond the course requirements and beyond personal reflection." As Teo suggested, the letter writing was but a tool, "a stimulus" and an invitation for their collective and supportive inquiry. Luro's comments capture the group's synergy: "I think it was the dynamic of the group and the fact that we (pause) didn't just leave it at the letter form… every time we sat down and had a conversation, it was a continuation of the letter."

Letter writing as articulation and perspective taking. Susie found that the letters "first of all allowed me to get my thoughts out… and go back to reread them to start to see things what I couldn't see because I was too close." Having ideas written allowed students to articulate, as Teo remarked, "pin point what I was trying to say." Luro's comments further support this place for perspective taking: "The letters invite other people to see things from your experience but at the same time they're completely objective so they can point things out to you as well." Susie raised new questions and ideas for Teo to consider in his analysis and wrote him, "I agree with you as far as the demographics of your class not really mattering with one exception. I think it might be interesting to take note of your students' gender in recording your results."

This critical friend team discovered that their ongoing and consistent sharing was useful in the development of their final projects and as Susie stated, "I ended up using mine (a letter) in the research paper and using it as one of my data collecting tools." When their private speech went public, it appeared to prompt openness, vulnerability and continuous learning as Luro's statement highlights:

> I allowed myself to step outside the situation and really get an answer. I wasn't expecting them (critical friends) to hold my hand. ..I learned that you don't always have to have the answers.

Letter writing as constructive and non-judgmental feedback. This team understood that they were a part of each other's research and showed care and concern for each other's efforts. They asked for, received, and gave advice easily and openly in a constructive, caring, and consistent manner. Luro offers support and guidance when she writes Susie and states:

> I understand how you might feel that this is a lot to take in such a short amount of time but these are important issues that go well beyond this semester and this class. By establishing these routines such as peer helpers and individual attention, students can develop into life-long learners.

There was honesty and support on the part of each respondent, "honest in what we had to say" and "the more honest you got with each other instead of being so formalized it actually worked out." Susie pushed the group for deeper critique and less politeness as she had experienced in her previous work as an editor. Nonetheless, she used a considerate manner sometimes laced with humor. In her response to Teo's third letter, she wrote, "I have always found the "No Opinion" column in surveys to be fascinating. Is it really possible to truly have no opinion?"

Evident in the critical friend responses to letters was a tone of assurance, non-judgmental support, appreciation, and congratulations. They empathized with each other's teaching struggles as was the case for Luro from Teo's feedback to her second letter:

> Teo wrote me and was like 'okay first of all chill out on calling your kids lazy thing. And you know, I think that you are too involved here so let's focus on this.' And he did a really good job of not only just calming me down but assuring me that what I was feeling was normal, however we need to move on and take a step back from there… and he did it in a really respectful way. And you know I was able to continue my project.

In an analytical memo I wrote, "The team went from getting this done as an assignment to living it out and constructing their understanding of critical friend work by practicing it." Teo took a leadership position in the team. He offered Susie this supportive comment in his tracked feedback of her research paper draft where he believes she trivializes her impact on students' learning: "You really think this is all the impact you had on your kids? I think you did a hell of a lot more than that. …Don't sell yourself short on what you are giving these kids!"

Letter writing as process. Each participant noted that they did not initially see the usefulness of the letter writing but came to understand its relevancy. Teo reports: "And at the start it became more like …you had to do three of them [letters]…so I feel like I remember grumbling about it going "okay I got to do these journal things." Luro laughingly shares a similar perspective during her interview:

> I think at first when we were sort of joking around about it, we thought it was just like you know one of those really cheesy things. You know again like you learn in teaching classes where everyone holds hands and sings Kum BaYah and that's just not the way the world works.

Susie adds, "I thought the critical friend letters were lame and stupid when we first started." Corey writes in his analytical memo about Teo's later understanding of process of the critical friend letter writing:

Teo truly got that the letters were an instructional tool designed to help students dialogue….He used the analogy of Mr. Miago from Karate Kid. He said that at first he did not understand where the letters were heading or their purpose. It was like Daniel doing crazy arm exercises that he saw no connection to karate. But then he realized that the letters were more than that; his learning transcended the syllabus and even the instructional activity.

Narrative of Critical Friend Team Two

Letter writing as audience. During critical friend work in class I observed this critical friend team as distant both physically and emotionally. One sat in a laid back position and another was doing most of the talking. They finished before all other teams. When I asked for updates, they indicated they just needed to go home and work on their project—alone. By the third letter, participants were responding to letter prompts in a bulleted format and as if they are only addressed to the instructor. Corey sharing his preliminary reading of the data writes: "Team Two did not get to the point of using their letters to inform their research but seemed to keep it at the reflection stage where the letters helped them rethink the ideas." The letters were useful for revisiting personal ideas as Ryan's comment indicates:

> The prewriting does help more than I'd like to admit it (chuckle)….Anytime you have to write it down and you have to come up with it ahead of time and there is going to be prethought … So you're constantly thinking about it.

In a similar fashion, the letter writing was useful for Zariah "because when you write in the letter format you are trying to explain...and probably so it helped in the role of reflecting and what I was doing." Letter writing also encouraged Zariah's borrowing of ideas from her critical friend: "I was reading her work and then reflecting on her work and finding any kind of suggestions. So it was like a double role-reflecting for more project ideas." Yet, the actual exchange, not borrowing, of ideas was not evident. Audience was problematic for this critical friend team when letters had not been sent according to schedule as Katherine frustratingly shares: "Usually I wasn't getting the response within the given amount of time… Therefore, when we were meeting I couldn't discuss it with them because it wasn't written." Katherine shared that not knowing when, or if, she would receive her teammates' letters led to an "uncertainty."

Letter writing as articulation and perspective taking. Students indicated the letters were a valuable vehicle for articulation of their thinking. Ryan remarks, "I have always been a face-to-face type of person…. so personally I don't like letter writing, but it was a good exercise because it helps you articulate your thoughts on paper." Katherine states in her interview that she might have benefited in working with someone from her own discipline. Nonetheless, she also states that in previous work, "I received a lot of help from people with different backgrounds, which was amazing. Unfortunately here, it didn't seem to work." Katherine explains she

went into the letter writing "absolutely expecting to gain alternative perspectives but I would have appreciated if the feedback had been a serious approach… I sort of didn't think we were on the same page." Her teammates understood her distress as Zariah states:

> We were going usually like last minute. … okay I'm super busy today. I have to export grades and I just sent this I hope you saw it…but I don't think she enjoyed working with us so much. I don't think it helped her to reflect… I don't think our feedback was so good for her.

Letter writing as constructive and non-judgmental feedback. Ryan gives brief feedback in letters and on research drafts. In his review of Katherine's paper, he praises the quality of her work and then adds "it is burdened with too much information. I easily got lost in the project." In a letter, he reminds her to remove the identification of people and places which he explains he is clear not to include in his project. He offers suggestions of using examples to illustrate her claims and writes: "You should decide on one technique, method, instrument and see if that changes your students' results rather than going around the school looking for everyone's input."

Placed within the context of critical friend work, the amount and quality of feedback by Zariah is extremely low. Zariah inserted 19 tracked comments in Katherine's research draft. In contrast, Susie offers Luro 25 tracked comments and 36 tracked comments to Teo which were not only technical and grammatical comments. Zariah chose not respond to both critical friends and it was not required that she do so. She does not give Ryan feedback and only worked with Katherine. Regardless, she was able to receive feedback: "So that was useful for me. …they also gave me some ideas of questionnaires that I applied and interviewing different people."

Corey is struck by the fact that Ryan is not mentioned by name by his teammates nor does he ever mention them by name. He noted: "This team completed the assignments but in a more perfunctory manner. They did not get past the assignments to deeper discussions and investment in each other's research." I wondered, , "Do students understand self-study teacher research, critical friend feedback, and my objectives?" Data indicated that they did. Katherine shares, "We had to draft a letter about certain parts of our research, how it's going, what problems we're facing. It's that, I guess a true comment from a critical friend." Zariah also understood the critical friend work "wasn't only writing three letters." Ryan sees the letter writing as objectifying the research process and adding validation:

> Anytime you have peer review that's automatically going to raise the stakes a bit more towards being objective because you're having a different person look at it and give you a new perspective, which is what I think is really helpful with having the critical friends.

Letter writing as process. The team successfully completed the course, which prompted Corey to ask me if Ryan's research proved as strong as the others. If so,

then "perhaps not all students have to get out of critical friend work what others got." Ryan's final paper, complicated by his inability to secure a classroom for enactment, was not as developed, yet was complete. Katherine's and Zariah's final reports were well-crafted in terms of extensive data displays and analysis. In her interview, Katherine said that knowing I was going to look at her work motivated her to successfully complete her project. Since her critical friend audience was problematic, she began to chart and bullet her ideas instead of using the letters. Zariah, receiving Katherine's chart and draft, explained that she adapted it, i.e., "the way she wrote the questions, the way she went through all the different parts of the project. And that helped me see I can make mine this way." Corey surmises, "Zariah did not view the letters as a stimulus to push her to think about her work or the research process."

Students in each case reported that they benefited from critical friend letter writing to document and acknowledge their thoughts with various levels of engagement and interest but with major distinctions. Those crucial differences are discussed next in terms of how they explicate my teaching and how they inform decisions for teacher educators establishing projects of a similar nature. The differences brought important questions to our attention.

Discussion and Implications

Both teams arrived at the same place in terms of completing their project and completing the capstone course to earn a Master of Education degree. Each student met the course goals of learning how to identify a research question, develop a rationale, write a proposal, use research literature, and design and enact a study with systematic evidence for improving their practice and students' learning. They each participated in writing. The data drawn from the extreme sampling revealed complexities of critical friend work using letter writing in ways that would not have emerged in another way. How did each team fare in the process?

In Critical Friend Team One, the letter writing transcended individual thought and become a more socially constructed process. There was a shared audience for their individual work. They engaged in cognitively and emotionally rich mediated conversations about their research. Working within and across ZPDs, they benefited from each other's perspectives, welcomed a distributed expertise, and developed a shared responsibility and commitment to each other's work. They were emphatic to each other's struggles and openly shared them without fear of judgment.

For Critical Friend Team Two, data indicates that the letters served as a tool for private speech on an intrapersonal level where they largely remained. This significant result was found because of the study's research design of extreme cases to examine the contrasting experiences of the critical friend teams. There was nonetheless, enhanced self-reflection, which has been noted as a benefit of critical friend work (Breslin et al., 2008). Feedback was minimized because they

were not accessible to each other. There was minimal affective support because of their minimal interaction or what Day and Leitch (2001) call the personal-professional and cognitive-emotional dimensions of professional learning. This does not mean that advice or support was not provided to other individuals on their critical friend team. It means they did not use each other as a means to reappropriate their personal understandings about teacher research—or in a Vygotskian sense, their thinking remained on a personal plane.

Although all students were able to successfully complete their reports, Critical Friend Team Two, as Corey noted, "missed the opportunity of critical friend work to transcend the letter writing to deep professional inquiry." Matusov (2001) asserts, simply providing the opportunity to learn via critical collaborative inquiry does not guarantee that the students will do so and not always in a quality manner. Designing a classroom "where the students are responsible for learning how to manage their learning and the teacher has responsibility for guiding the students in this process" is a difficult endeavor (Matusov, 2001, p. 383).

After completing the study, I asked myself as a teacher educator how I would re-think or re-work ways of using the letters and especially in terms of guiding student responsibility. As noted earlier, central to the course design was students' shared responsibility for improved learning through forums of peer interchange. Both groups did participate on a team but the quality of those experiences was vastly different. The study raised new questions. What does it mean to be an honest, supportive, and collaborative teacher colleague? There were of course others students who fell in between the extremes cases but I asked myself, "Is that good enough?" "How do I encourage all students to move beyond the letter writing requirement?" "How do I better structure the process of critical collaborative inquiry?" While acknowledging there is no formula for any teaching, I thought deeply about these new questions that arose from the study and implications for other teacher educators.

One major insight from the study was a need to emphasize a mutual accountability and responsibility in the project and in delivering letters on time. As Susie shares, "Those critical friends held me accountable and maybe that has something to do with why it worked well." Accountable also means being honest, open, and transparent about things that are not working with a public discussion of mistakes for professional growth and change. Luro asserts: "People have to honest and not afraid to ask questions that they don't know the answers to." Then they can better embrace that vulnerability undergirded by trust with peers that develops over time.

The extreme differences in the two teams also suggest there is an in-betweeness of support and critique in peer review. Although students are encouraged to provide constructive, non-judgmental, and consistent feedback, they also as Susie insisted, "need to push beyond politeness." Furthermore, students might benefit from observing how other teams dialogue as Luro suggests:

I heard other groups… and I don't think that they were really fully listening to

what others had to say…I knew as much about Teo's project and Susie's project as I knew about my own project.

Yet another insight I learned from students was that the letters were mere prompts for later conversation and mutual commitment. This was a significant finding because the letter exchange catapulted Critical Friend Team One into further and continued critique. Letter writing served as a tool in mediating their learning by creating a group discourse of mutual sharing, critiquing, and crafting their research proposal and then continued until they finished their projects. They used the letters to articulate their research ideas to themselves and to someone else with the benefits of enhanced reflection and receiving alternative points of view. They mediated each other's learning in an informal, yet serious manner. As Luro suggested, encourage students to practice "this big combination of playfulness but also seriousness" when they write each other.

Finally, letter writing assisted students in understanding that research is a process although it was not immediately obvious to them. They realized that the letters were a tool to construct the final project when they inserted pieces of their letters into their final paper. In his interview, Teo suggested that I tell future students that all the pieces fit together in the end but also added, "It's kind of like the matrix; you don't know what it really is until you experience it yourself… it would be tough to put that into a syllabus." Although teacher educators might tell students to "just trust the process" that may not be enough to convince them. Ultimately, courses have final grades based on the completion of assignments and students want to be assured they are on the right track. In a personal reflection I wrote:

> Finding a balance between giving too much structure and pushing students to go to the edge of their discomfort and trust the process is a constant teaching dilemma. I am committed to encouraging students to embrace uncertainty without a tightly structured protocol but I'm still working on how to do that better.

Exploring how critical friends used letter writing as a tool during the development of their teacher research projects has applicability to teacher educators interested in using peer audience to support teachers' professional development. This study also implicates the need for further exploration in structuring these activities.

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